Players welcome Grand Slam prize money boost but vow to push for more

MELBOURNE: The Australian Open will offer a record A$111.5 million ($74.73 million) in prize money this year and while players welcomed the increase, top names like Coco Gauff and Aryna Sabalenka said the push for a bigger payout must continue across the Grand Slams.

The world's top players wrote a letter to the Grand Slams calling for significant improvements in prize money in April last year.

The French Open ($65.42 million) and Wimbledon ($71.60 million) boosted their prize pots last year, although they still fell short of the US Open's purse ($90 million).

Twice Grand Slam champion Gauff said the Australian Open's increase was a positive step but more could be done considering the tournament's revenue, which the Australian Financial Review reported was $467.33 million last year.

"The percentage, of revenue comparison, is still not where we would like it," Gauff told reporters on Friday. "There's still further conversations that have to be had, not just with the Australian Open but with all Grand Slams. We have player representatives that have been working hard to do that a lot for us because we can't do it, be in person as often.

"From my last update, the collective feeling is that 'yes, there's been progress', but I think it's not where we would like to see it."

World number one Sabalenka echoed Gauff's view but said at least the Grand Slams were listening to the players.

"I hope one day we'll get to happy place for everyone," she added.

The sport's governing bodies are also facing a lawsuit filed by advocacy group the Professional Tennis Players' Association which, though no longer associated with co-founder Novak Djokovic, is pushing for better pay and improved welfare.

Reigning Australian Open champion Madison Keys said she was completely in favour of players being supported better by the Grand Slams.

"It's really important. We give a lot of ourselves to this sport," Keys said. "They, being the highest revenue holders, it absolutely makes sense. As we're the product, it makes sense for us to be partners. It's been the most productive conversations we've had, which leads me to be cautiously optimistic for the future."

The French Open said when it received the letter last year it was committed to working with players and stakeholders to develop tennis responsibly and collectively, while the US Open welcomed open and direct conversations with players.

Men's world number three Alexander Zverev said there had to be better cohesion among the sport's stakeholders.

"It's very difficult to get them in one room and talk about what is good for the future of tennis really," he added.—Reuters

NONTHABURI (Thailand): Players of Pakistan and Bhutan vie for the ball during their SAFF Futsal Championship match at the Nonthaburi Stadium on Friday. Pakistan made a resounding comeback from 2-0 down to win 4-2 with Mohammad Adan Ashfaq scoring twice to record their first victory at the tournament. Pakistan, who lost 7-1 to the Maldives in the event opener, their first international outing, next face Sri Lanka on Sunday.—Courtesy SAFF

Sundar ruled out of New Zealand T20s

NEW DELHI: Washington Sundar has been ruled out of India's five-match Twenty20 International series against New Zealand, the country's cricket board (BCCI) said on Friday, with the all-rounder facing a race against time to be fit for their World Cup title defence.

Sundar complained of rib discomfort while bowling in a One-day International against New Zealand last week and was subsequently ruled out of the ODI series.

"Washington Sundar underwent scans after reporting an acute onset discomfort in his lower rib area while bowling during the first ODI," the BCCI added.

"This was followed by an in-person consultation with an expert. He has been diagnosed with a side strain and has been advised rest for a few days, following which he will report to the BCCI Centre of Excellence for further management of his injury.

"The men's selection committee has named Ravi Bishnoi as his replacement. The men's selection committee has also added Shreyas Iyer to the T20I squad for the first three matches as a replacement for the injured Tilak Varma."—Reuters

HARARE: England batter Caleb Falconer plays a stroke during the ICC U-19 World Cup match against Pakistan at the Takashinga Sports Club ground on Friday.—Courtesy ICC

Pakistan lose U-19 World Cup opener to England, Afghanistan stun SA

HARARE: Despite a fighting half-century by captain Farhan Yousuf, Pakistan suffered a 37-run loss in their ICC U-19 World Cup opening match against England at the Takashinga Sports Club in Harare on Friday.

Chasing 211, Pakistan were dismissed for 173 in 46.3 overs, as England handed the Asian champions an early setback in the 16-nation global event.

Pakistan lost opener Sameer Minhas (10) who was dismissed by Alex Green for in the fourth over. The seamer then removed fellow opener Mohammad Shayan (seven) to reduce Pakistan to 23-2 in the sixth over.

Number three batter Usman Khan (six) soon fell to James Minto as Pakistan dropped to 28-3 before Ahmed Hussain (12) and Farhan (65) tried to rebuild the innings.

However, the recovery remained shortlived as Ahmed was sent back to the pavilion by Farhan Ahmed while Huzaifa Ahsan (17) was dismissed by Ralphie Albert, leaving Pakistan struggling at 77-5 in the 24th over. Two overs later, Albert struck again to remove wicket-keeper Hamza Zahoor (four) to make it 85-6, further denting Pakistan's chase.

Farhan meanwhile led from the front, anchoring the innings with a composed knock. He added a vital 48 runs for the seventh wicket with Abdul Subhan (14), bringing up his maiden youth ODI half-century.

The resistance ended when Subhan was run out, and Farhan was later dismissed by Minto. The skipper's 86-ball knock included three fours and four sixes.

Pakistan's tail failed to resist as England closed out the match.

Earlier, England posted 210 all out after being asked to bat first.

Openers Ben Dawkins (33) and Joseph Moores (seven) provided a steady start before Pakistan struck back through Ali Raza and Ahmed Hussain, reducing England to 67-3.

A key partnership between Caleb Falconer and Ralphie Albert revived the innings. Falconer played the standout knock, scoring a 73-ball 66 laced with three fours and two sixes, while Albert contributed 25 off 37. Pakistan clawed back late wickets, but England's total in the end proved sufficient.

For Pakistan, Ahmed claimed three wickets for 38 while Ali Raza, Momin Qamar and Abdul Subhan claimed two each. Falconer was named player-of-the-match.

In other matches played on Friday, Australia crushed Ireland by eight wickets in their Group 'A' game while Afghanistan stunned South Africa by 28 runs in their Group 'D' encounter.

After restricting Ireland to 235-7, Australia chased the modest target in just 39.4 overs at the Namibia Cricket Ground in Windhoek thanks to player-of-the-match Steven Hogan's century (115) and an unbeaten 77 by Nitesh Samuel.

South Africa in a huge upset lost the game as they looked to chase 267 at the High Performance Oval in Windhoek.

After being put in to bat, Afghanistan posted a solid 266-8 off the stipulated 50 overs as Faisal Shinozada (81), Khalid Ahmadzai (74) and Uzairullah Niazai (51 not out) struck half-centuries. The Afghans then dismissed South Africa for 238 as Jason Rowles (98 off 93) remained the lone batter who offered resistance. Khatir Stanikzai (2-46) and Abdul Aziz (2-49) were the main wicket-takers for Afghanistan.—Agencies

Slot 'happy' to welcome Salah back at Liverpool after AFCON

LIVERPOOL: Arne Slot said he would welcome Mohamed Salah back at Liverpool even if he had 15 attackers as the Egypt forward nears a return from the Africa Cup of Nations.

Salah is set to play in Egypt's third-place play-off match against Nigeria in Morocco on Saturday.

His impending return has been a major talking point after he took aim at the club in an explosive interview in early December.

Salah accused Liverpool of throwing him "under the bus" after he was benched for three games in a row and said he had no relationship with manager Slot.

But he appeared as a substitute in a 2-0 Premier League win against Brighton and Hove Albion on Dec 13, providing a assist, and Slot subsequently said the club had moved on from the furore.

Slot, whose fourth-placed team host struggling Burnley on Saturday, was asked at his pre-match press conference about Salah's return.

"First of all, he needs to play another big game for Egypt on Saturday," said the Dutchman.

"And then he comes back to us, and I'm happy that he comes back. Mo has been so important for this club, for me, so I'm happy that he's back.

"Because even if I had 15 attackers I still would have been happy if he would have come back, but that's not our current situation. So I'm happy to have him back after an important game that he still has to play."

Salah scored 29 Premier League goals to win the Premier League Golden Boot last season as Liverpool romped to a 20th English league title, but has managed just four league goals during the current campaign.

Slot was asked when he expected Salah to be available to play.

"Next week," he said. "We're in talks with him, what is expected of him over there and what we expect over here.

"But first of all, he needs to have an important game on Saturday, and next week he will be back with us."

Liverpool take on Roberto de Zerbi's Olympique de Marseille in the Champions League on Wednesday before travelling to Bournemouth next weekend.

The Premier League champions' title defence collapsed with a run of six defeats in seven league matches starting in late September.

But Slot has steadied the ship and the club are now unbeaten in 11 games in all competitions.—AFP

Sixth Dakar triumph looms for Al-Attiyah

YANBU: Qatar's Nasser Al-Attiyah looked set for a sixth Dakar Rally title after the Dacia driver won Friday's penultimate 12th stage in the Saudi Arabian desert and extended his lead to 15 minutes with 105km remaining.

The stage win was the 50th of the 55-year-old's career, equalling a record in the car category held by Finnish rally great Ari Vatanen and France's 14-times Dakar winner Stephane Peterhansel.

The rally ends on Saturday outside the Red Sea port of Yanbu.

In the motorcycle category Honda's American Ricky Brabec returned to the top of the standings after taking a strategic decision on Thursday to drop back and get a better start position.

"To win this stage and to have a good lead now is really amazing," said Al-Attiyah after the 409km drive over rocks and sand left him on the verge of victory.

"You can lose everything today but we did a good job. One day to go, but we need to be smart and really focused."

Ford's Nani Roma remained his closest rival but the Spaniard's overnight deficit of eight minutes ballooned after he broke his car's front axle and lost a wheel.

French team-mate Romain Dumas came to Roma's rescue at the stage finish, providing the parts for the second-placed driver to continue on the link road and reach the overnight bivouac on time and without penalty.

Ford's Mattias Ekstrom was third overall, 23 minutes and 21 seconds off the lead, with Dacia's nine times world rally champion Sebastien Loeb a close fourth and ahead of Ford's Carlos Sainz.

American Mitch Guthrie was second on the stage for Ford, with Australian Toby Price third in a Toyota.—Reuters

DACIA Sandriders's Qatari driver Nasser al-Attiyah and co-pilot Fabian Lurquin of Belgium compete during the 12th stage of the Dakar Rally, a 409km distance from Al Henakiyah to Yanbu, on Friday.—AFP

Alcaraz focused on career Grand Slam in Melbourne

MELBOURNE: Carlos Alcaraz said winning the Australian Open to complete the career Grand Slam was the main goal of a season in which Juan Carlos Ferrero is not by his side as head coach for the first time since he turned professional at 15.

The world number one split with Ferrero last month, abruptly ending a seven-year partnership that delivered 24 titles including six Grand Slam crowns.

The 22-year-old would eclipse Don Budge as the youngest man to achieve the career Grand Slam by winning at Melbourne Park and the Spaniard said he was happy with his preparations and hungry for success.

"I think this my main goal for this year. It's the first tournament, the main goal," Alcaraz told reporters on Friday.

"So it's going to be really interesting for me how I have prepared ... I think I just made a really good preseason, just to be in a good shape."

Alcaraz has played only an exhibition match against world number two Jannik Sinner in the lead-up to the Australian Open, which starts on Sunday, and he is keen to get his campaign started.

"I'm just hungry for the title, hungry to have a really good result here. I'm just getting ready as much as I can," he added. "I'm really excited about the tournament begin."

Alcaraz will be guided by coach Samuel Lopez in the absence of 2003 French Open winner Ferrero. He said there were no bad feelings following the split.

"With Juan Carlos, we decided to do it. I'm just having plenty of confidence in the team that I have right now ... the practices have gone really well. I'm feeling well," he said. "So I'm just excited about the tournament and to begin with the team that I have right now.

"I'm really grateful for the seven years I've had with Juan Carlos. I learned a lot. Probably thanks to him, I'm the player that I am right now. But internally we decided like this. We closed this chapter in mutual. We're both still friends, [we have a] good relationship."

Meanwhile, the greatest threat to Alcaraz's quest for a career Grand Slam is rival Jannik Sinner.

The Italian served a three-month suspension for twice testing positive for a banned anabolic steroid in 2024, but the world number two said on Friday that the ban last year made him stronger as a person and more relaxed on court.

"Last year was definitely a much more difficult situation because in this moment last year I didn't know exactly what's going to happen," he said. "So I tried still to enjoy it when I went out on the court, but still had it in my head kind of.

"It was difficult for me, but also for the family. I tried to stay with the people I really love, which at times worked very well. At times it was a bit disappointing, too."

The Italian will get his campaign under way against France's Hugo Gaston, with master coach Darren Cahill again in his corner.

KEYS READY TO SOAK UP 'PINCH-ME MOMENTS'

On the women's side, Madison Keys is soaking up the fun parts of returning to the Australian Open as defending champion and the American said on Friday she is eager to get a photo with her name in the champions' tunnel to send to her mother.

"There's a really cool photo of me holding the trophy. Getting to see those, it's something you dream of in your career," she told reporters.

"I have not seen my name in the tunnel yet. I hope I can go in there when there's no one else so I can take a picture and send it to my mom.

"I've always remembered walking through that tunnel and seeing all the names and everything. It was a little bit of a pinch-me moment where I was like, 'Wow, I'm going to be up there.'"

The 30-year-old, who beat both world number two Iga Swiatek and number one Aryna Sabalenka in the semis and final last year, acknowledged there was pressure of defending her maiden Grand Slam title but she was also embracing the challenge.

"Even though I've been on tour for a long time, this is also still my first experience as that [defending champion]," she said.

"I'm really trying to just kind of embrace that and take it in and soak it in, because I feel like so often we look back and we regret that, even in the hard moments that were stressful and pressure and all that, we didn't find all the fun parts of it."

Meanwhile, Swiatek, unlike Alcaraz, dismissed suggestions the career slam is driving her Australian Open campaign this year, with the world number two saying on Friday that she tries to block out outside noise and focus only on "grinding match by match".

"Honestly, since the beginning of the year, there are many people coming to me and talking to me about it. I'm really just focusing on day-by-day work. This is how it's always been for me," Swiatek told reporters.

"This is how I actually was able to achieve the success that I already have, just focusing really on grinding match by match. Winning a Grand Slam is tough, a lot of things have to come together to do that.

"It's a tough tournament, so I have no expectations. Obviously it would be a dream come true. This is not my clear goal that I wake up with. I'm thinking more about how I want to play, what I want to improve day by day."—Agencies

MELBOURNE: Alexander Zverev of Germany hits a return during a practice session on Friday.—AFP